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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in belief systems about friendship employed by two groups of students (total n=24) with mild disabilities in a vocational program. Members of one group had a fair number of reciprocal friendships and high satisfaction, whereas members of the other group had few reciprocal friendships and low satisfaction. Individual interviews involved grouping and ranking various friendship behaviors. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures were employed. Findings of the quantitative data yielded no significant differences between groups' complexity of thinking about friendship. However, the qualitative analysis found the high friendship group employed such constructs as "helping," and "sticking up for a friend," not employed by the low friendship group. Additionally, the high friendship group consistently showed dissatisfaction only with amount of time spent with friends whereas the low friendship group reported dissatisfaction with reciprocity, quality, and number of friends, as well as with time spent with friends. (Contains 33 references.) (DB)

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DIFFERENCES IN BELIEF SYSTEMS ABOUT FRIENDSHIP EMPLOYED BY TWO GROUPS OF ADOLESCENTS WITH MILD HANDICAPS

Objectives:

1. To examine the differences in belief systems about friendship employed by two groups of students with mild disabilities in a vocational school context

Theoretical Perspective and Framework:

While a number of studies have suggested that peer relations offer a unique contribution to an individual's psychological growth, long-term adjustment, and maturity (Adler, 1927; Hartup, 1983; Piaget, 1932; Selman, 1980; Sullivan, 1953; Youniss, 1980), surprisingly few of those studies have concentrated on issues specifically concerning friendship (Hartup, 1983). The paucity of friendship research is puzzling, since a number of studies have found positive correlations between friendship and physical and mental health (Arnetz, Theorell, Levi, Kallner, & Enroth, 1983; Berkman & Syme, 1979; Cobb, 1976; Duck, 1983; Ginsberg, Gottman, & Parker, 1986; Miller & Ingham, 1976).

Children who are clinically defined as having mild handicaps tend to have fewer friends than children who are not handicapped (MacMillan & Morrison, 1984), yet there is not a consensus as to *why* these children have lower status and are, therefore, rejected and not accepted (MacMillan et al., 1986). However, one line of research reviewed in MacMillan et al. (1986)

suggests that children who have mental handicaps are rejected for the same reasons that children without handicaps are rejected: antisocial behaviors (Baldwin, 1958; Gottleib, Semmel, & Veldman, 1978; Hartup, 1983; Johnson,1950; McMichael, 1980). Since there is a body of research which suggests that beliefs drive behaviors, one viable avenue of investigation of friendship difficulties may be afforded by research on friendship belief systems (Duck, 1983; Hartup, 1983).

One theory by which belief structures regarding friendship may be examined is Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory. Kelly's perspective is similar to that of other researchers who have conceptualized people as naive scientists (Bruner, Olver, & Greenfield, 1966; Heider, 1958; Piaget, 1932), yet his perspective differs in important ways. Chief among these differences is Kelly's (1955) rejection of the dualistic notion that cognition can be separated from emotion; therefore, Kelly (1955) defines a personal construct as *a discrimination in which cognition, emotion, and behavior are inseparable.* The construct, as a discrimination, is a hypothesis which guides the naive scientist's behavior. Kelly's (1955) personal construct perspective is one of the perspectives which guided the study.

In his review of the friendship research, Hartup (1983) suggests that there appears to be considerable agreement in the literature concerning the development of friendship belief systems. Hartup suggests that increases in the number of beliefs concerning friendship, the complexity and organization of those beliefs, and the flexibility and precision with which those beliefs are used increase with age throughout middle childhood and adolescence. These changes appear to result from a complex relationship between social experiences, cognitive development, and language development. One way in which advances in cognitive development and language development may be

interpreted employs an experiential perspective: the older a child is, the greater the number of social experiences to which he is ordinarily exposed, and thus, the greater chance for successful development of the cognitive and language knowledge and skills necessary for successful social interactions and relationships (Hartup, 1983). One type of experiential perspective is a cultural perspective (Cole & Scribner, 1974; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). This perspective would suggest that both language and cognitive development are the result of social experiences in a specific sociocultural context. From this perspective, Langness and Levine (1986) suggest that the rejection and poor social acceptance of children and adolescents who have mild handicaps may be due to that population's lack of social experiences regarding friendship. This lack of social experiences in turn results in poorly developed belief systems regarding friendship. This cultural perspective of cognitions in social context is another of the perspectives which guided the present study.

Methods:

Kelly's (1955) personal construct perspective provided the methodology for the study. This method, the repertory grid technique, was chosen because it has yielded meaningful results in studies involving children and adults with mental handicaps (Barton, Walton, & Rowe, 1976; Wooster, 1970). One hundred forty-five adolescent students from two vocational schools participated in eight large-group interviews designed to: 1) determine specific behaviors employed by friends within each vocational class context ; 2) to determine reciprocal friendships enjoyed by students with mild disabilities within the vocational class context; and 3) to assess friendship satisfaction within the vocational class context.

Forty-eight students with mild disabilities participated in the large group interviews. These students were ranked by number of reciprocal friendships

and by satisfaction with those friendships. The groups were collapsed by median split. Those 24 students scoring high in both number of friendships and satisfaction and low in both categories were targeted for individual interviews. The students who comprised the high group were designated Social Bees and the students in the low group were designated Victims; these category names were employed by Kaufman (1984) in her study of friendships among persons with mild disabilities.

During each individual interview, the participant was given eleven index cards. On each of the cards was written one of the friendship behaviors described by students in that participant's vocational class. The student was asked to group the cards in ways that were meaningful to her, and to name each group. This procedure was repeated until the student could no longer regroup the cards. The participant was then offered a card on which was written the name she had given one of her groups. She was asked to rank the behavior cards from most relevant to least relevant to that group. This procedure was repeated until all cards had been ranked on all groups. The rank information was recorded by the investigator on a grid matrix. Each student was then asked to give examples of specific behaviors listed on one of the cards. She was also asked why engaging in the behavior was important. This procedure was repeated until she could provide no more meaningful answers. In this way, superordinate beliefs were elicited.

Finally, one demographically matched student from each group was selected for an extensive interview regarding friendship within the vocational class context in order to assure that the data were grounded in reality. These students also each completed a second repertory grid. Bannister (1960) Consistency Scores were then derived from the participants' first and second grids. A Spearman's rho was then derived from these scrores as a measure of

reliability. Since neither score exceeded rho, the results suggested a satisfactory degree of reliability. Since the repertory grid technique (Kelly, 1955) is based on the belief that each person interprets the events in her life based on her own subjective reality, the technique is not a standardized test, but rather a variable assessment procedure aimed at a sensitive and extensive exploration of that individual's personal reality (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). For that reason, the choices the participant makes may be considered prima facie evidence of validity.

Results and Conclusions:

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures were employed to examine the differences in belief systems employed by the two groups of students. First, each student's grid data were analyzed by use of principal components factor analysis. The complexity of belief systems for each participant was determined by the number of factors contained in her friendship belief system, the correlations between those factors, and the absolute value of the correlations between all constructs within those factors. The mean score of each group was determined on each of the three measures of complexity. The mean scores of the two groups were then compared by use of a one-tailed *t*-test for independent samples. Next, qualitative techniques described by Spradley (1980) and Fransella and Bannister (1977) were employed in order to analyze the qualitative data from both groups, and to develop taxonomies of friendship beliefs for further comparison.

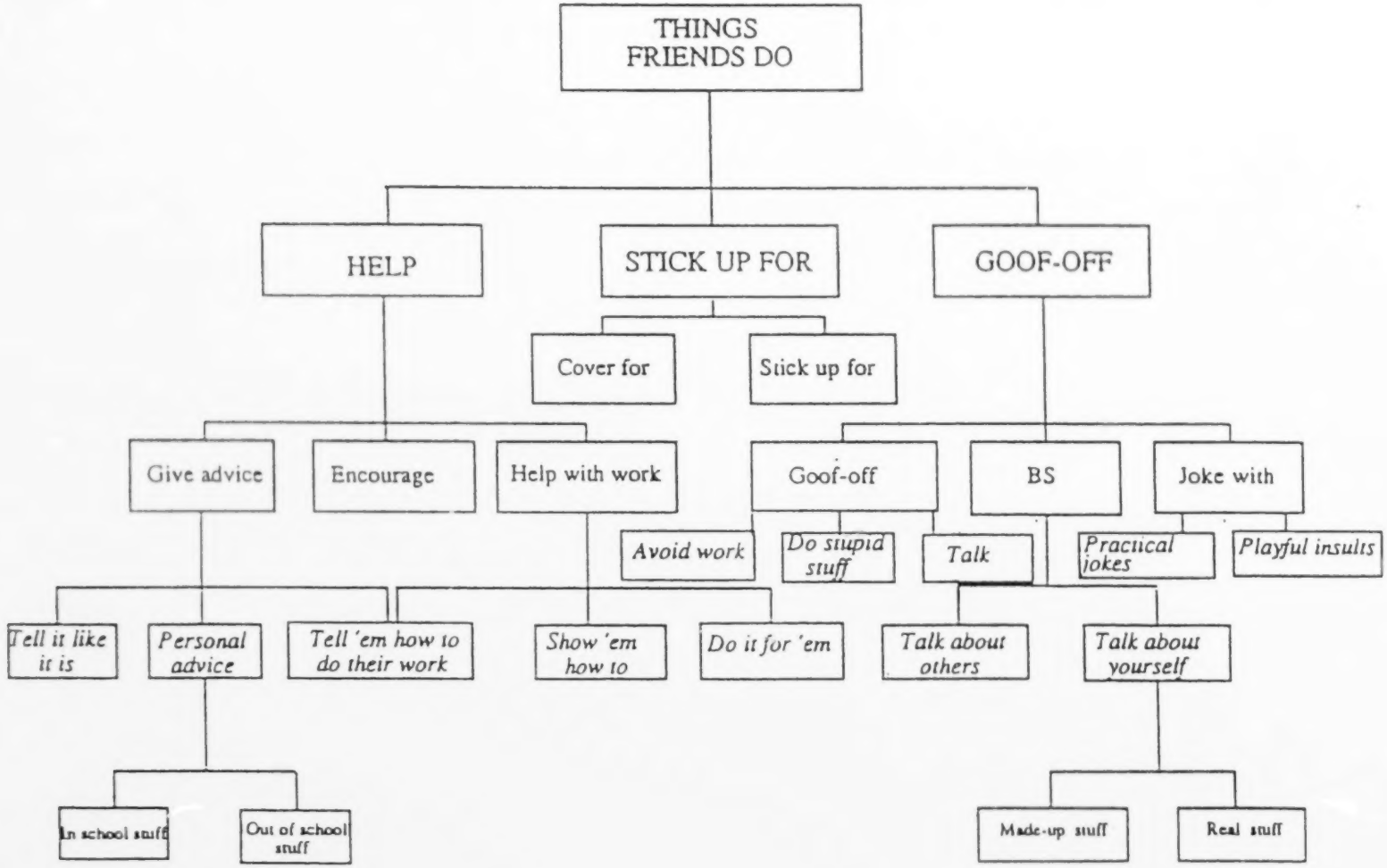
The findings of the quantitative data yielded no significant difference in the two groups' complexity of thinking about friendship. However, the qualitative analyses produced interesting results. The Social Bees consistently employed the constructs *goofing off, helping,* and *sticking up for (a friend)* in

their belief systems (see Figure 1). The Victims, however, employed only the construct goofing off and a subset of the helping behaviors. These students did not employ the construct of sticking up for a friend in their belief systems. This difference, which was analyzed by use of a chi-square test of independence, was found to occur at the .01 level of significance for both of the behaviors grouped under the sticking up for (a friend) construct: *covering for* and *sticking up for (a friend)*. Therefore, it appears that while no difference in *complexity* of belief systems employed by the socially successful and unsuccessful students exists, important differences in *content* of belief systems of the two groups may exist.

One possible explanation for the lack of differences in complexity of beliefs and the presence of differences in content of beliefs is that socially unsuccessful students may engage in as many friendship interactions as their successful peers, *but that those interactions may be of a different type*. There are studies which suggest that few socially unsatisfied students are entirely friendless; instead, they appear to be members of social networks which consist of two or more socially unsatisfied persons (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Garieppy, 1988; Ladd, 1983). It may be that a student learns unsuccessful friendship behaviors within the context of this social network of unsatisfied persons. The student in turn assists new members of the network in learning socially unsuccessful behaviors.

Several methodological concerns should be addressed. First, each group consisted of only twelve participants. Such small numbers could have skewed the findings. However, the consistency of lack of significant differences between the two groups in complexity of belief systems coupled with the presence of significant difference in content of belief systems suggest that studies involving larger groups of participants would yield the same results.

Table 1 : Taxonomy of Social Bees' Conceptualization of Things Friends Do in a Vocational Class.



Second, the use of a median split and collapse of the groups may present a concern, since a difference of only one friend or one answer on the satisfaction scale would have changed a participant's group status. Of interest, however, is the finding that members of the Social Bee group consistently showed dissatisfaction with only one facet of friendship satisfaction, i.e. time spent with friends, as compared to the Victim group, who consistently reported dissatisfaction with reciprocity, quality, and number of friends, as well as time spent with friends.

Educational or Scientific Importance:

The information garnered from the study offers small contributions to both the scant literature concerning the dynamics of acceptance and rejection of persons with mild disabilities and to the emerging field of research on friendship. The study also suggests two practical implications for the education of students who experience difficulty in maintaining satisfying friendships. First, the personal construct perspective would suggest that if friendship beliefs drive friendship behaviors, then socially unsatified students may increase their social success through changing their friendship beliefs. Specifically, it may be that incorporating the construct of sticking up for a friend into a friendship belief system may help a student to increase her social satisfaction. Second, the contextual perspective would suggest that friendship beliefs may effectively be altered by a teacher's careful and moral manipulation of contextual variables within the classroom.

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